

EARLY DETECTION AND TREATMENT OF BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS IN SCHOOL CHILDREN

SYNOPSIS

Prompted by journal articles and Juror interest in school nurses, the Grand Jury embarked on reviewing the methods used by schools to detect children with behavioral problems and how their special needs are being addressed. The Jury worked under the premise that some children have certain physical, emotional and security needs that must be met before they are able to concentrate on doing well in school. This included an examination of the role of the school nurse and evaluated the impact on the youngster when early detection is made but not addressed. The detection and treatment of children with behavioral problems at an early age may greatly reduce future treatment costs and add to the quality of life for those children.

Most teachers and school personnel concur that they are able to identify behavioral and academic problems within the first few weeks of a school year. The success of the teacher's intervention is often dependent on parent involvement. Frustration with the system results when the at-risk child is identified and cannot be offered assistance because of parental resistance or indifference. The Grand Jury recommends County-wide coordination of funding and organization of programs to address the needs of children with behavioral problems and provide aggressive outreach programs to their parents. In an appendix, the Jury suggests an Ombudsman Program.

ISSUES

The committee focused its research and investigation on the following questions:

1. Can teachers detect abnormal and behavioral problems in their students in the normal course of conducting class?
2. Are teachers and school personnel knowledgeable about the services available to at risk students at their school site?
3. What steps are taken when a child is identified as an at-risk student? How quickly are these steps initiated after identification is made?
4. Is parental involvement essential to the process of dealing with at-risk students?

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5. Do schools effectively involve the parents?
6. What are the chances of the schools' intervening successfully with at-risk students without parent permission and support?
7. What efforts are being made to involve parents in their children's scholastic or behavioral problems?
8. Are remedies available to schools if parents do not cooperate when their children demonstrate behavioral problems?
9. Can schools and social service agencies establish liaisons that allow each entity to perform its function independently, while providing a holistic approach to effect a positive educational outcome on students?

BACKGROUND

The educational system has been seeking ways to deal with at-risk students as long as students have been attending school. These students traditionally exhibit emotional problems, low self-esteem and academic achievement. The problem can be exacerbated by student drug use, gang involvement and random acts of violence. Experts in the field agree that at-risk students may comprise no more than 15% of the school population. However, these students often require more than 75% of a classroom teacher's time and more than 65% of the school's resources.

When at-risk students are identified, a team of school personnel notifies the parents and elicits their support in implementing an education plan. The cooperation of the parent is essential to assure success. School administrators explained that parents are often confused or antagonistic about placing their child in a special education class. Greater success in obtaining their support is achieved through home visits and personal dialogue.

The Grand Jury investigated the role of the school nurse, as well as the number of school nurses in the County's school districts. The procedures used by the schools to identify and work with at-risk youth were reviewed. The Jury met with school officials, community activists, teachers, County program specialists, health professionals, and parents in an effort to understand the issues of working with at-risk students in our public schools.

The Jury was convinced that most of these professionals are aware that a need exists to involve parents in any recommendations for a child's improved academic or behavioral performance. When parents do not participate in a collaborative scholastic plan, there is a potential for academic or social failure in

their youth. The dilemma for school districts is bringing together the best ideas, reviewing pilot programs that are having the desired results, finding the appropriate monies, and adopting a common plan for all our young people.

A student who is productive and engaged in the school experience, whether academic or vocational, is not likely to become the at-risk student who drains the system of resources.

PROCEDURES EMPLOYED

The Grand Jury reviewed numerous records and reports from various school districts and the San Diego County Office of Education, as well as articles in journals such as *Legal Analyst Review*, *Journal of School Nursing*, and *SDSU Magazine*. Additionally, the Jury interviewed a cross section of qualified and experienced educators, special education experts, school nurses, health aides, and community resource specialists. Among those interviewed were:

California State Senator

Superintendent of San Diego County Office of Education

School district superintendents

Child Health, Inc.

California School Nurses Organization

Elementary school principals

Elementary school teachers

June Burnett Institute for Children, Youth and Families

Ready to Learn, San Diego City Schools

San Diego County Children and Families Commission

Intervention officers, San Diego Unified School District

Agency Director, Health and Human Services, County of San Diego

School Nurse Advisory Committee

FACTS

- A. The single most common assistance requested by teachers is help in managing student problem behaviors.¹
- B. School personnel, early in the school year, can identify at-risk students.²
- C. While at-risk students may comprise no more than 15% of a school's population, they often require more than 75% of the teacher's time and 65% of a school's resources.³
- D. Remedial and/or intervention help is available to children with detected early childhood mental or physical problems.⁴
- E. A relationship exists between ineffective discipline and other antisocial behaviors.⁵
- F. Parental involvement with the health and welfare of their children, although essential for beneficial results, cannot be forced upon parents.⁶
- G. Grants are sought and awarded to individual schools for similar projects, and there is no clearinghouse within the County of San Diego to coordinate or evaluate these grants.⁷
- H. The San Diego County Office of Education has developed a wide variety of "involvement" programs.⁸
- I. One local three-year program implementing the resources and personnel of its local community and school has demonstrated conclusively that truancy rates and student learning scores are positively impacted when parents are brought into their children's educational experience.⁹

¹ *The California Commission of Teacher Credentialing's Advisory Panel on School Violence (1995).*

² Grand Jury interviews.

³ The Rose Institute, *Fifth Annual Analysis of San Diego County Public School District Budgets.*

⁴ Grand Jury interviews.

⁵ *Safe and Drug-Free Schools (1995).*

⁶ Grand Jury interviews.

⁷ Grand Jury interviews.

⁸ Reports from the San Diego County Office of Education.

⁹ City Heights K-16 Educational Pilot Program.

FINDINGS

- I. Many schools in San Diego County have developed a variety of programs to assist in the management of behavioral problems. Existing State law requires the governing board of each school district to adopt a policy on parent involvement.¹⁰
- II. A very few at-risk students in a class can increase teacher workload and substantially drain resources.
- III. According to the superintendent of one of the County's largest school districts, any system that works should include schools, parents, and social services in a shared responsibility.
- IV. When parents collaborate with schools to reinforce newly learned skills and behavior, there is a strong likelihood that the student will develop successfully.¹¹
- V. Relatively few school districts in San Diego County have utilized "parent involvement" programs effectively.
- VI. In practice, there are few, if any, sanctions available to the schools when parents are uncooperative.
- VII. School districts are beginning to understand the importance and impact of community involvement and volunteerism in local schools.¹²
- VIII. Parent liaison and mentoring programs have been developed in some schools to bridge the gap between parents, schools, and community resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the San Diego County Board of Education:

- 02-02:** Provide monitors responsible to oversee ongoing educational grants, collect data and disseminate all results to all school districts in the County of San Diego.

¹⁰ *Legislative Counsel's Digest*, AB 33-Soto 10/99.

¹¹ *Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood*, Werner and Smith (1993); Roger G. Lum, Ph.D., Director of Health and Human Services, County of San Diego.

¹² Roger G. Lum, Ph.D., Director of Health and Human Services, County of San Diego.

That all San Diego County school districts for grades kindergarten through middle grades, and the San Diego County Board of Education:

- 02-03:** Reduce duplicative grant projects that have similar objectives through a central clearinghouse of grant proposals at the County level.

That the San Diego County Board of Education and the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency, jointly:

- 02-04:** Develop a program to marshal available community resources to help parents and teachers share responsibility for at-risk children.

That all San Diego County school districts for grades kindergarten through middle grades, and the San Diego County Board of Education:

- 02-05:** Organize and expand groups of community volunteers to work with parents of similar backgrounds in the local schools.

REQUIREMENTS AND INSTRUCTIONS

The California Penal Code §933(c) requires any public agency which the Grand Jury has reviewed, and about which it has issued a final report, to comment to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the agency. *Such comment shall be no later than 90 days after the Grand Jury submits its report to the public agency.* Also, every ELECTED county officer or agency head for which the Grand Jury has responsibility shall comment on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of that county officer or agency head, as well as any agency or agencies which that officer or agency head supervises or controls. *Such comment shall be made within 60 days to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court with an information copy sent to the Board of Supervisors.*

Furthermore, California Penal Code §933.05(a), (b), (c), details, as follows, the manner in which such comment(s) are to be made:

- (a) As to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:
 - (1) The respondent agrees with the finding
 - (2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.

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- (b) As to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:
- (1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.
 - (2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation.
 - (3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.
 - (4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.
- (c) If a finding or recommendation of the grand jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a county agency or department headed by an elected officer, both the agency or department head and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the grand jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary or personnel matters over which it has some decision making authority. The response of the elected agency or department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with the Penal Code §933.05 is required from the:

**San Diego County Board of
Education**

**Recommendations: 02-02, 02-03
02-04, 02-05**

**San Diego County Health &
Human Services Agency**

Recommendation: 02-04

Alpine Union School District

Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05

Bonsall Union School District

Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05

**Borrego Springs Unified School
District**

Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05

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Cajon Valley Union School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Cardiff School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Carlsbad Unified School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Chula Vista Elementary School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Coronado Unified School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Dehesa Unified School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Del Mar Union School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Encinitas Union School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Escondido Union School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Fallbrook Union Elementary School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Jamul-Dulzura Union School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Julian Union School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
La Mesa-Spring Valley School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Lakeside Union School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Lemon Grove School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Mountain Empire Unified School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
National School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Oceanside Unified School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Poway Unified School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Ramona Unified School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05

Rancho Santa Fe School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
San Diego Unified School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
San Marcos Unified School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
San Pasqual Union School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
San Ysidro School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Santee School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Solana Beach School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
South Bay Union School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Spencer Valley School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Vallecitos School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Valley Center-Pauma Unified School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Vista Unified School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05
Warner Unified School District	Recommendations: 02-03, 02-05

APPENDIX

An Ombudsman Program

The Grand Jury conceived the idea of an ombudsman program, which is explained below. While not proffered as a specific recommendation, implementation of such a program would satisfy the objectives of Recommendations 02-04 and 02-05.

It is the mission of the schools to educate students and teach English to those who are deficient. Without jeopardizing this guiding principle of the schools, a conduit must be established by which uncooperative parents of at-risk children are brought into the system for the sake of their children and the betterment of the community.

A successful ombudsman would be well versed in the community and the school district's local activities, including its strengths and weaknesses. The selected ombudsman could be placed either in an individual school or in a school district, as needed, to inform, educate, and solicit the cooperation of parents of at-risk students. The ombudsman should develop a trained corps of local volunteers to assist in these efforts. While methods used by each ombudsman may differ, the goals of an effective ombudsman would remain consistent—to gain the willingness of parents to work within the system to educate their children in a healthy and safe manner.

The program could begin with selected school sites within each County Supervisorial District and be funded with Proposition 10 funds¹³ for a period of three years. During this time the project should be monitored and evaluated for its effectiveness in bringing recalcitrant parents into the system.

This approach will require the cooperation of educators, elected officials, and community leaders in a shared responsibility of ideas, funding, and accountability.

¹³ This act was passed by voters in November 1998. Called The California Children and Families Act, this statewide initiative increased the tax on cigarettes and tobacco products. The revenue is to be used to provide comprehensive, integrated systems to promote childhood development.